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QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATION - A STRATEGIC DIMENSION IN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

Dumitru Săndulescu[1], Cristina Vasciuc (Săndulescu)[2], Ion Stegăroiu[3]
[1]Colegiul Tehnologic Viaceslav Harnaj, Sector 1, București, ORCID: 0000-0002-1190-8343, miti.sandulescu@yahoo.com,
[2]Liceul Tehnologic Energetic Elie Radu, Strada Șoseaua Vestului, nr. 22, Ploiești, ORCID: ORCID: 0000-0002-8259-4433, crisabebe2005@yahoo.com,
[3] Academy of Romanian Scientists, 3 Ilfov Street, Bucharest, Romania, ORCID: 0009-0008-5946-2601, stegaroiuion@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The quality of educational services is an essential pillar in building a modern and development-oriented state. These changes are closely linked to the financing of education from public funds and the responsibility of the authorities in the administration of this sector. In order to prevent the waste of public resources, it was necessary to implement efficient control methods, meant to ensure the optimal functioning of the educational system. It is also essential that schools adopt a coherent set of tools that allow them to treat students and their parents as customers, who must benefit from educational services at the highest quality standards. This type of approach helps to increase efficiency and build trust in the education system. The article aims to highlight the importance of quality assurance in education as an essential factor for the development of a high-performance and inclusive educational system. By analyzing the principles, processes and benefits of quality assurance, the article aims to highlight its role in improving the performance of educational institutions, in promoting the equity and accessibility of education, as well as in adapting them to the requirements of modern society and the labour market. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the need for an approach that integrates continuous assessment, collaboration between the actors involved and the efficient use of resources, in order to guarantee high standards of quality and sustainability in education.
KEYWORDS: educational services, quality of education, competences, management, educational resources

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1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is a fundamental element in the development process of a modern and competitive society, having a direct impact on economic, social and cultural progress. In a global context marked by rapid changes and complex challenges, quality assurance in education has become a strategic priority for countries that want to build resilient education systems, capable of responding to the diversified needs of students, parents, teachers and society as a whole.

Quality assurance in education involves more than meeting performance standards. It is a dynamic and complex process, aimed at monitoring, evaluating and continuously improving educational processes, institutional management and learning outcomes. This process provides an integrated framework to ensure that every learner benefits from equitable learning opportunities and access to quality educational resources, regardless of their social, economic or geographical background.

In Romania, the implementation of quality assurance systems in education has undergone a significant evolution in recent decades, being inspired by European and international models. The creation of structures such as the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) was an important step in standardizing, evaluating and improving the performance of educational institutions in the country.

The importance of quality assurance in education is not limited to guaranteeing standards of excellence. It plays a key role in promoting public confidence in the education system, facilitating academic mobility, recognising qualifications and adapting education to the demands of a globalised economy. A well-regulated and evaluated education system also contributes to the formation of generations capable of actively participating in sustainable development and to strengthening a society based on values such as equity, diversity and inclusion.

This article addresses the importance of quality assurance in education, analyzing the key processes, associated benefits and challenges that need to be overcome in order to transform this dimension into a

real tool for improving educational outcomes. Also, the specific aspects of the Romanian educational context are highlighted, with a focus on the implementation of innovative practices and alignment with international trends in the field.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the realization of this article, a qualitative approach was used, meant to provide a deep understanding of the processes, importance and impact of quality assurance in education. This methodology allows to explore the diversified perspectives of the actors involved in education and to identify the essential factors that contribute to the continuous improvement of educational quality.

2.1 Objectives

- ***Analysis of current quality assurance practices in pre-university education institutions in Romania.***
- ***Identify the challenges and solutions associated with implementing a robust and efficient quality assurance system.***

The analysis of the documents was carried out by verifying the official ones and the relevant reports on quality assurance in education: annual reports published by ARACIP and ARACIS, the relevant legislation on quality assurance, national and European strategic documents, which aimed to identify the current practices, performance indicators and standards used in quality assurance. [18]

Restricted access to certain official documents or internal processes limited the completeness of the analysis.

With the integration of bibliographic sources, the research methodology aims to explore the topic of quality assurance in education, using a qualitative approach that combines data collection from primary and secondary sources. [14, 15]
Bibliographic sources used: official documents (*Annual Reports on the Quality of Education in Romania); Quality standards in higher education*; *Recommendations on inclusive education,* scientific studies and papers, legislative framework [16].

2.2 Research questions

Even though actions that contribute to improving the quality of education take place in the classroom and in school, they are constantly influenced by decisions and measures taken outside school, especially at different levels of the education system. It is therefore essential to ask whether these actions are coordinated, coherent and geared towards the common goal of continuous improvement in the quality of education.

This article starts from the hypothesis that a sustainable improvement in the quality of education can only take place through a more efficient management carried out by all the actors of the education system, from the central administration to the teachers in the classrooms. A solid and contextualized knowledge of quality management capacities in education systems can contribute to the identification of relevant directions of intervention for strengthening existing institutional and professional practices, taking into account the constraints that actors in the education system face on a daily basis and that prevent them from achieving the objectives set in terms of improving the quality of education.
In this context, the article aims to answer the following two research questions:

- ***What is the capacity of education systems to manage the quality of education in education?***
- ***What methods can be used to improve their ability to manage the quality of education?***

To answer these research questions, the article is based on the analysis of data collected during the qualitative survey carried out in the school.

The collection and analysis method adopted is a qualitative approach inspired by action research, emphasizing participatory techniques. Data collection and triangulation were carried out by various methods, including:

Documentary analysis, to determine what is expected of each actor according to their role in the education system.

Observation in the workplace, to identify and describe the daily working practices of educational actors.

Individual interviews, to understand the motivations behind these practices, especially when they deviate from the rules and regulations in force.

Focus groups and workshops, used to validate findings and find solutions to difficulties encountered by educational actors.

This approach is iterative and progressive, taking place at different levels of the education system. The process begins with the identification of educational management practices within classrooms and school units and advances to school districts (inspectorates).

The data was collected by immersion in the workplace, for a period of approximately two weeks. The preliminary results were analyzed and interpreted in collaboration with the educational actors involved. These results were then fed into the next-level analysis, contributing to a progressive enrichment of the data collection process.

The analysis focused on high-performing schools in challenging contexts to identify effective educational management practices that could become models of good practice. The study was conducted in two schools, and four classes were studied in each educational unit. [17]

To ensure the validity of the conclusions, educational actors who did not participate directly in the field observations were involved in the data analysis sessions. Thus, the aim was to identify common problems and challenges for the entire education system, and the resulting conclusions were integrated into the higher-level analysis.

The results of the data collection were consolidated and presented in a final workshop, in order to validate and formulate strategic directions for improving educational management.

Table 1. Level of the education system

Level of the education system	Stages of data collection
Educational establishments	- 2 school units analyzed, documenting the practices of teachers and principals, as well as educational activities (pedagogical groups, teachers' councils, etc.). - 4 classes observed and analyzed, each session being accompanied by an interview with the teacher before and after the lesson. - 4 school-level analysis and reflection workshops, involving the entire teaching staff to discuss the collected data. - 4 inter-school workshops, bringing together representatives of the schools involved.
Decentralised administration	- 4 teams from school districts (principals, inspectors, pedagogical advisors, planners, statisticians, evaluators, etc.), whose educational management practices were identified through regulatory analysis and personalized interviews. - 2 participatory workshops with decentralized services for documenting management practices and discussing the main challenges identified in schools.
Central administration	- 5 interviews conducted with officials from the central directorates involved in education quality management - A workshop organized with representatives of the central administration to document educational management strategies and analyze data collected from educational establishments and decentralized services.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality assurance is an essential process that involves the systematic evaluation and review of the educational offer, with the aim of maintaining and improving its quality, equity and efficiency. This process includes various components, such as self-evaluation, external evaluation (through inspections) of the institution, evaluation of teachers and heads of entities, as well as evaluations [14]

Specialists define quality assurance as a process of continuous evaluation [19] or planned and systematic

control that targets a system [19], an institution or a program [19], in order to ensure compliance with the established criteria and their improvement, so that the beneficiaries receive standardized quality services. Emphasis is also placed on responsibility by providing information and formulating judgments based on clearly defined criteria [19].

In other words, the quality assurance system focuses on governance mechanisms that inspire stakeholder confidence in the institution's ability to meet all the necessary conditions to comply with the quality criteria. This system is made up of policies, processes and procedures that guarantee the achievement of the quality of education and its continuous improvement, based on continuous evaluation and comparison of what has been achieved with what has been planned, while identifying the causes of the dysfunctions found.

Europe has attached particular importance to this topic, structuring the intervention at three levels:

- ***At the level of institutions, by broadly promoting the quality culture and raising awareness among all stakeholders of their responsibility in achieving the quality of learning for all students;***
- ***At the state level, by strengthening partnerships between institutions, governments and quality assurance agencies, with a focus on developing procedures and requirements for compliance with standards;***
- ***At the European Union level, by accrediting institutions by quality assurance agencies to enable them to compete with similar institutions in the US, Japan and China.***

Quality assurance objectives include:

- ***Providing information on the state of the education system, its results and possible ways to improve it;***
- ***Guaranteeing the existence of the necessary conditions for providing quality education;***
- ***Compliance with the educational criteria that ensure the quality of the curriculum and its improvement;***
- ***Developing an institutional quality culture;***
- ***Ensuring the protection of the main beneficiary of educational services – the student.***

A study by the Australian Academy of Higher Education [12] states that it is essential to direct resources towards aspects that support student success, such as the development of the competences of teachers and learning centres. It is also stressed that decreased supervision can only have a positive impact on learning if it is well managed.

Recent studies show that the most effective way to ensure quality is to strengthen self-assessment and stimulate healthy competition between institutions, by correlating the level of funding with the degree of achievement of the objectives set in relation to the national quality criteria. According to researchers [5] and [19], quality assurance systems have evolved in three stages, suggestively named: "the secret garden", "collective assurance" and "the role of the market".

The first stage is characterized by treating quality assurance as an internal matter of each institution, with a focus on input resources, especially on the skills of staff and teachers, by applying summary administrative procedures, but without formalizing quality processes. During this period, competition between institutions was low and external regulation and governance were poorly defined.

The second stage brings quality into the sphere of common interest, between individuals and institutions, under the supervision of the state, which begins to get actively involved. There is some competition between institutions, but the logic of supply remains dominant, even if external evaluation and self-evaluation offer certain guarantees. During this period, the focus shifts from inputs to the effectiveness of processes, which are becoming increasingly better defined and formalized.

The third stage marks the entry of the market as an actor in quality assurance. Competition between institutions becomes the main guarantor of quality, by liberalizing market access and increasing the volume of public information about institutions, such as rankings. The focus is less on inputs and processes, and more on outputs and outcomes.

If in the first two stages the definition of quality and the evaluation of its achievement belonged to the educational community, the third stage gives the last word to the beneficiary of the educational service. Previously, quality was defined by the observance of

the educational criteria imposed by the state or institutions, reflecting a pedagogical vision of learning. In the logic of the market, however, the consumer becomes the center of concern, and quality is measured by the degree of satisfaction of the student and the ability to enter the profession.

The implementation of a genuine quality assurance system involves a profound transformation in:

- ***cultural and intellectual structures of education,***
- ***curriculum,***
- ***teacher training programmes,***
- ***school textbooks,***
- ***pedagogical approaches,***
- ***educational technologies,***
- ***assessment,***
- ***learning environment,***
- ***governance structures,***
- ***as well as partnerships with the private sector and civil society.***

These transformations explain why Quality Assurance has become a central pillar in education policies globally – providing solutions to the problems of education systems and contributing to the prevention of more complex ones, by: [1,8]

- ***clear operating rules,***
- ***a shared vision,***
- ***visionary leadership,***
- ***informed strategic planning,***
- ***responsible management of human resources,***
- ***fair distribution of resources,***
- ***and a shared will to serve the interests of students.***

The implementation and development of robust quality assurance systems are essential to ensure high-quality and inclusive education in the European Education Area. These systems provide an indispensable framework for monitoring and continuous improvement of educational processes, helping to maintain high standards of performance and promoting diversity and equity in education.

Quality assurance also plays a crucial role in supporting student mobility in Europe by increasing transparency and trust in education systems. It facilitates the mutual recognition of qualifications obtained in different countries and of learning outcomes abroad.

Member States are encouraged to take the following measures to support a quality, inclusive and accessible education system that enables everyone to develop their essential competences, in line with the European framework 'Key competences for lifelong learning': [7]

- ***Promoting key competences: Developing and strengthening key competences from childhood and throughout life, integrating them into national continuing education strategies.***
- ***Support for students: Ensuring adequate support for all students, including those with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds, to reach their full potential.***
- ***Raising the level of basic skills: Increasing the level of literacy, numeracy and digital skills, along with the development of lifelong learning skills.***
- ***Promoting STEM: Fostering skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), with a particular focus on engaging young people, including girls, in these fields.***
- ***Digital skills and creativity: Increasing the level of digital skills, promoting entrepreneurship and cultivating creativity among young people.***
- ***Language learning and active citizenship: Supporting the acquisition of language skills, including in foreign languages, and promoting active citizenship and awareness of common European values.***
- ***Diversifying learning methods: Using diverse learning methods and environments, including digital technologies, and supporting educational staff in adopting these practices.***
- ***Validation of competences: Strengthening collaboration between educational institutions and promoting the assessment and recognition of competences acquired in different contexts.***
- ***Mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Introducing the UN goals, especially SDG 4.7, into***

educational curricula, with a focus on climate change education and sustainable resource use. [17]

- ***Monitoring progress: Reporting progress in promoting key competences in all sectors of education and training, using the frameworks and tools of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation (ET2020) or beyond.***

Member States are invited to take the following measures to foster common values:

- ***Encouraging learning and promoting common European values from childhood and at all educational stages, strengthening social cohesion and a sense of belonging.***
- ***Implementation of the Paris Declaration, with a focus on education for active citizenship, ethics, tolerance, social and civic competences.***
- ***Use Council of Europe instruments, such as the Competence Framework for Democratic Culture, to promote civic education.***

In order to provide inclusive education, Member States should:

- ***Promote inclusion in education for all beneficiaries by providing them with appropriate support according to their needs.***
- ***Work with the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to monitor and implement successful practices.***

In order to promote the European dimension in education, Member States are encouraged to:

- ***Support understanding of the European context and common heritage through participation in the e-Twinning network, cross-border mobility and transnational projects, including an annual European Union Day in Schools.***
- ***It enables educational staff to promote shared values and support inclusive education through training and empowerment.***

Implementation measures should include: [4]

- ***Reviewing existing policies to ensure compliance with these recommendations.***
- ***Engaging the public in evidence-based policy-making on the social and civic dimensions of education.***
- ***Promoting collaboration through the exchange of best practices and peer learning within the EU.***
- ***Making effective use of EU funds to implement the recommendations.***

Developing and supporting the skills of all beneficiaries is an essential pillar for ensuring equitable and quality education. All young people must have access to opportunities that enable them to develop a full range of key competences, including literacy, language skills, mathematics, science, digital and programming skills, civic and social skills, as well as entrepreneurial and transversal skills such as creativity and critical thinking.

The 2006 European Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning supports this development and its revision, included in the New Skills Agenda, will continue to improve vocational education and training. To achieve these goals, educational institutions need to adopt new approaches to learning.

Contextualized learning, which connects the educational process with real life experiences, produces better results. Methods such as project-based or problem-solving learning, on-the-job placements and involvement in community activities stimulate pupils' motivation, provide relevance to the content studied and facilitate the development of social, civic and entrepreneurial skills. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education becomes more effective when it is integrated with economic, social, and environmental challenges or related to the arts and design, highlighting its applicability in everyday life.

The integration of digital technologies into the educational process can significantly improve the quality of learning and support innovation in educational institutions. These technologies enrich educational experiences and support the development of a diverse range of skills, beyond simple digital literacy. However, only a quarter of European children receive training from teachers who feel confident in the use of digital technologies. These digital tools can also facilitate communication and collaboration within and between institutions,

contributing to the more active involvement of students and their families in school life. [4]

4. RESULTS

Quality assurance in education involves the implementation of three main processes at the institutional level, in accordance with legal regulations: internal quality evaluation, external quality evaluation, and continuous quality improvement. The objectives of these processes, defined by standards and reference benchmarks, include the following: [9,11]

- ***Institutional capacity, which covers administrative and managerial structures, logistics, and human resources.***
- ***Educational effectiveness, focused on the content of study programs, learning outcomes, financial resource management, and graduate employment rate.***
- ***Quality management, which targets quality assurance strategies and procedures, the development and updating of study programs, teacher evaluation, access to learning resources, and information transparency.***

This research highlights three main findings. The first refers to the obstacles that hinder the effective implementation of educational reforms. The second emphasizes the differences in the perception of educational challenges depending on the level at which an actor is positioned within the educational system, suggesting the need to redefine the roles of certain stakeholders, especially those at the decentralized level and those closest to educational institutions. The third finding identifies the main priority levers for improving quality management in education.

The analysis of the three core functions of educational management has led to a better understanding of the challenges faced by educational systems in implementing the established plans and policies. Quality management capacities are far from ideal, which highlights the urgent need to strengthen the competencies of the actors involved.

Function 1: Assessment of education quality and setting objectives

This is the only function that is relatively well managed in the two schools analyzed. The analysis provided information on students' learning levels and the factors influencing their performance. One school implemented a method for assessing academic results.

Function 2: Action planning and resource allocation

The main issue begins at this level. Action plans are usually developed at the central level, with local actors only marginally involved, participating in late-stage consultations on documents that are already prepared.

Another challenge is the lack of funding. Even when some regional departments create their own plans, they are often unrealistic as they do not take into account the available resources.

Function 3: Monitoring and supporting the implementation of reforms

Both systems analyzed face significant challenges in this area. Educational monitoring is mainly based on standardized quantitative data (e.g., number of inspections carried out, training sessions organized), but it does not provide information about the quality of these activities.

The data collected revealed several challenges that hinder effective quality management in education. However, these challenges also represent opportunities to improve educational systems. Three main levers were identified, primarily targeting local actors closest to the schools. [19]

4.1 Strengthening the capacity of local actors to implement and monitor educational policies

In the schools analyzed, there is a clear intention to develop regional educational plans tailored to local realities. However, local actors often limit themselves to mechanically filling out standardized forms and tools provided by central authorities, without deep reflection on their relevance. This approach causes regional educational plans to largely replicate the national strategy, without taking into account the specific context of each region and without the necessary resources for their implementation.

To improve this process, it is essential to build the capacities of local actors to develop authentic educational projects that are connected both to the national strategy and to the local realities and needs. If local actors become the architects of these projects, they will be more engaged in their implementation and monitoring, leading to better application of educational policies.

4.2 Leveraging educational data for strategic decision-making at the local level

The analysis and effective use of data collected from the education system are essential for identifying problems and implementing appropriate solutions. However, the data available at the local level is not used effectively for several reasons:

- ***Lack of incentives for data use: No one is directly held accountable for interpreting and using this data in decision-making processes.***
- ***Data management and storage issues: Many data sets are still stored in physical format or in incompatible databases, making analysis and cross-referencing difficult.***
- ***Lack of trust in data: Sometimes, in order to avoid sanctions, local actors conceal real problems and provide data that presents a distorted reality.***

Given the importance of using data to guide educational actions, it becomes essential to strengthen the capacity of local actors to interpret and utilize this information in order to make informed and relevant decisions.

4.3Improving dialogue and collaboration between levels of the educational system

Although there are official structures for dialogue among educational stakeholders—such as back-to-school meetings or sectoral consultations—these are not used effectively. In many cases, these meetings are unidirectional, serving only to transmit information from the central level to local actors, without encouraging real feedback and collaboration.

To improve the implementation of educational policies, it is essential to establish a genuine two-way communication mechanism through which local actors can clarify and adapt educational strategies and communicate the challenges they face to central authorities.

This requires:

- ***Revising the agenda and format of meetings to make them more interactive and solution-oriented.***
- ***Creating effective mechanisms for local actors to express their real challenges and needs.***
- ***Ensuring that the feedback collected is used in the central decision-making process.***

Improving quality in education is a continuous process of evaluation, analysis, and implementation of corrective measures, carried out by educational institutions and education providers. This process relies on the use of appropriate procedures and the application of reference standards to achieve educational objectives.

The reports generated from internal and external evaluations are used by institutional leadership to analyze educational and administrative activities, contributing to decision-making on institutional development. Improvement proposals identified in the annual internal evaluation reports are integrated into institutional development plans.

At both local and central levels, evaluation results are used to make decisions regarding school funding, to analyze and forecast the needs of the education system, and to prepare annual reports on the state of education.

County school inspectorates and the Ministry of Education play a key role in monitoring and controlling quality in pre-university education, using evaluation reports to set goals and track progress.

Standards for teacher training are necessary. These standards focus on core competencies in teaching, educating, assessing/diagnosing, and innovating, while also promoting the continuous professional development of teaching staff.

In terms of content, the standards should define the following focus areas (competency domains) for the teacher training curriculum:

- ***Teaching and education: analyzing and evaluating institutional processes, as well as reflecting on them to improve the quality of education;***
- ***The profession and role of the teacher: professional development of teaching staff, managing conflict situations, and making decisions in the context of educational conditions;***
- ***Didactics and teaching methods;***
- ***Aspects and processes of learning, human development, and student socialization;***

- ***Motivation for learning and academic achievement;***
- ***Differentiation, inclusion, and individual student support;***
- ***Educational diagnosis, evaluation, and counseling;***
- ***Effective communication: constructive interaction, moderation, and conflict resolution in educational contexts;***
- ***Professional use of learning technologies in the teaching process;***
- ***School development: understanding the history, structures, and evolution of the education system and school institutions;***
- ***Educational research: objectives, methods, interpretation, and application of research results in pedagogical practice.***

5. CONCLUSIONS

Quality assurance in education is a fundamental pillar in building a modern, equitable, and inclusive educational system. Based on the analysis carried out, several relevant conclusions emerged regarding the importance, challenges, and future prospects of implementing a robust quality assurance system in Romania.

Quality assurance is essential for improving educational performance, developing students' competencies, and enhancing educational inclusion. The implemented standards and procedures provide a coherent framework for continuous evaluation and for adapting educational processes to the evolving needs of society and the labor market.

Internal evaluation, conducted by educational institutions, and external evaluation, led by specialized bodies such as ARACIP and ARACIS, contribute to identifying strengths and areas for improvement. This integrated process facilitates the promotion of a "culture of quality" and supports strategic planning at both institutional and national levels. [2,3]

The main challenges identified include:

- ***Insufficient resources for implementing and maintaining quality standards.***
- ***Resistance to change from some educational actors who perceive evaluation processes as bureaucratic.***
- ***Disparities between urban and rural areas, which generate inequities in access to quality education.***
- ***The integration of early childhood education into the quality assurance system, a recent challenge requiring legislative and administrative adjustments.***

Quality standards emphasize inclusion and equitable access to education. However, achieving these goals requires adequate funding and active support for students with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

To meet contemporary demands, it is necessary to:

- ***Implement continuous training programs for educational staff to foster better understanding and application of quality standards.***
- ***Adopt digital solutions to simplify evaluation processes and increase their transparency.***
- ***Promote collaboration between educational institutions, authorities, and other stakeholders to develop an educational system capable of addressing current economic and social challenges.***

Alignment with the requirements of the European Education Area and the application of the principles of "Key Competences for Lifelong Learning" reinforce the integration of Romanian education into a global framework, encouraging mobility and the recognition of qualifications.

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